

JOHN W. THIERET, THE CURATOR

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John Thieret's complex and remarkable personality had a way of leaving its mark on all who encountered him; those who met John and came to know him even briefly have rich and lasting memories of him. I am the one who, in many ways, had to step into John's shoes soon after his retirement from Northern Kentucky University, where I began my academic career in 1992. Of course, I could never fill John's shoes, and I soon learned to tell my new-found NKU colleagues on first meeting them that I was occupying the position John had vacated, but I was not John's "replacement." Most of the time, I received knowing chuckles in response to such a self-introduction.

Occupying the academic appointment John had held also meant I was the first to assume a curatorship for the herbarium that John built. After his arrival at NKU in 1973 as Chairman of the Biology Department, John lost no time in establishing a herbarium there. During my tenure as curator at NKU, John remained very active—in effect, John and I served as co-curators of the herbarium for nine years, to my great benefit. This relationship makes me uniquely qualified to remember John The Curator, a side of John to which I will limit the rest of my remarks.

John strove for excellence in everything concerning the NKU Herbarium. He put his heart and soul into collecting, identifying, labeling, mounting, and filing plant specimens in the herbarium. Though he collected far more specimens than most botanists (in the several tens of thousands), he was never in competition with others to beat their collecting records. Rather, he was interested, above all, in quality over quantity. Instead of complaining about the tedium of pressing plants, typing labels, or gluing specimens on mounting paper, John took sincere pleasure in executing these tasks that many field botanists foist on assistants. Once a specimen was in the herbarium, he insisted on the highest standards for its curation. Many times when I hosted visitors to the NKU Herbarium, or I traveled to use other herbaria in Kentucky, I heard the remark that the NKU Herbarium was the best curated herbarium in the state of Kentucky. Within a short time, I came to see for myself that this statement was true.

John had a photographic memory, which served him very well as curator. I can best illustrate John's memory by relating an experience that continues to

amaze me. In the late spring of 1996, John entered the herbarium the day after I had returned from a long field trip through the southeastern United States for my research. John found me puzzling over a specimen I had collected. Though I was familiar with most flowering plants present in the springtime in deciduous forests of the Southeast, I had found something in one Alabama forest that completely stumped me. I had never seen this species, didn't know its family, and couldn't even be sure it was a monocot, though I somehow thought so. Turning to John, I admitted that I didn't know where to begin with this one, but suspected it was something "really good." After all, what else could I say to cloak my ignorance? John gazed at my find, hesitated only a moment, didn't say a word, and marched to one of several bookcases present in the herbarium. There, he removed one issue of one of the many scientific journals for which we had long series. Soon, he produced a photograph, and asked me, "Is this your plant?" With that photograph (Whetstone 1984: 133), I realized I had found the rare *Croomia pauciflora* (Nutt.) Torr. of the obscure family Stemonaceae. In response to my query if he had seen the plant, John responded, "No, but I remembered seeing that photograph appear in this paper many years ago."

When it came to desiderata for the herbarium, John was utterly ecumenical. Whether the lowliest, most inconspicuous, most downtrodden weed or the loftiest tree, John was interested in learning its name, how to identify it, whether it was poisonous, and if he had any specimens of it in the herbarium. His enthusiasm was infectious and quickly endeared him to other naturalists, particularly in the field. When he encountered a plant species he hadn't seen in several years, he would treat the plant as if he'd run into a long-lost friend. My most recent field trip with John was last April, when he came to Delaware for a brief visit. I insisted on taking him to a nearby racetrack that was full of vernal weeds in all their unmown glory. Within minutes, John showed me *Sibara virginica* (L.) Rollins, a mustard species he knew well from Kentucky. Further investigation showed it to be previously undocumented for Delaware, though botanists have been hunting green treasure in this state since the earliest 1800s. Such was all in a day's work if your combination of vast knowledge, keen eye, and unclouded memory were what made John Thieret the unparalleled botanical talent he was.

John was very generous with imparting knowledge it had taken him years to amass. From him, I learned a tremendous amount, and have benefited immensely. Though John could be demanding, uncompromising, and prickly at times, he was also uncommonly human. So often when I expressed frustration at ill-prepared students, particularly ineffectual bureaucracy, or the insufficiency of a 24-hour day, John would sigh and remark, "In a hundred years, no one will care a thing about it." Yet, he cared about curation, cared about herbaria, and cared especially deeply for the NKU Herbarium, one of John Thieret's great legacies. Hopefully, in a hundred years, people will care about John.



John Thieret collecting herbarium specimens, Elko County, Nevada, 11 August 1993.

REFERENCE

WHETSTONE, R.D. 1984. Notes on *Croomia pauciflora* (Stemonaceae). *Rhodora* 86:131–137.